

# DG INSIGHTS

## DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS

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### About DG Insights

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## Democracy or Elections

*Please note: This is a translation of the original article submitted in French and available [here](#).*

War, Clausewitz said, is the continuation of politics by other means. Politics therefore is a form of social conflicts management in a given society, through means other than war. Democracy therefore is one of the forms, albeit a peaceful one, that the management of social conflicts in a society may take.

### Democracy as a political process

This preamble was necessary to highlight that democracy is only one type of social and political organisation among many others and that in itself democracy is not unambiguous. On the contrary, the debates (and often conflicts) among, and within nations, reveal that the very definition of democracy still remains a key political issue. Does a leader have the right to change his country's Constitution to adjust the allowed number of consecutive terms? Do parliamentarians have the right to get elected and then change parties? Are there limits to the freedom of expression? What are the correct forms of popular participation? These and many others are the questions that are at the heart of debates around the definition of what is and what constitutes democracy.

In such debates, a key process that is constantly mentioned, that resurfaces regularly and is considered a pivotal process of a democracy is **elections**.

Indeed, at present, to hold an election seems to be the pre-fabricated response to any democratic problem that arises in developing countries. The holding of "free and transparent" elections, the solution advocated by the Western world to address the problems of democracy in developing countries comes usually with an impressive display of experts, observers, as well as logistical and financial support to ensure the necessary but insufficient conditions for the exercise of this so-called democratic right.

In light of these efforts to globalize elections, one should therefore examine the reasons that have made possible this shortcut between elections and democracy such that the first has become synonymous with the second. A review of the institutionalization of elections in the Western world shows that the promotion of elections by the latter in developing countries is based on a rather ethnocentric conception of democracy; which in most cases is not adapted to the social and political conditions in many developing countries.

### Elements for a history of western democracy

The history of democracy in general and universal suffrage in particular teaches us that it was built on a class divided society that was facing simultaneously the industrial revolution and the impoverishment of the masses. These gave rise to social movements demanding a more equal participation in the political decision-making process. Let us also recall that at the origin, access to the State machinery and even the right to vote were reserved for the "bourgeoisie"; the people with a fortune and an income high enough to enable them to do politics on a voluntary basis.

Also, in those days, social divisions that lay between capital and labor, urban and rural, Protestant and Catholic were subsequently embodied in political parties/ groups. Under pressure from these new political groups and social movements, universal suffrage was introduced, and resulted in greater competitiveness in the political arena.

This increased competition, in turn led to a professionalization within the parties; and also gave birth to an emerging class of professional politicians with all its faults and shortcomings. That being said, this political process was characterized among other things by a party system based on distinct political agendas; a democratization within these parties, with the aim of appointing the appropriate staff for the professionalization of the political system; and consequently the need to find sustainable financing mechanisms, which continues to be an issue as demonstrated by the numerous scandals on political parties financing.

These multiple historical aspects should obviously be explored further in order to comprehend their singularity and significance in their respective context. However, it is clear that the institutionalization of a democratic practice based on universal suffrage is the result of a very complex genesis that is tied to a particular socio-economic context. That notwithstanding any election in the Western World is based on two fundamental principles:

1. A party system that translates social divisions into political interests
2. The majority rule as the *modus operandi* for political decision-making (based on the belief that the majority represents the will of the whole).

### ***Election ≠ Democracy***

Reducing democracy to the holding of elections as it is often done in developing countries does not take into account the many prerequisites that induce both a political and social meaning to this practice borne of a very specific context. In light of the ethnocentrism which characterizes the promotion of elections, one can legitimately question the usefulness of organizing and/ or supporting; and sometimes even imposing elections in developing countries and particularly in Africa.

Indeed, putting the cart before the bull and thinking that democracy will occur through elections, is to remain blind to the context and the impact it can have on the politics of a nation. With few exceptions, at least in Africa, political parties are not differentiated by their political agenda. This is not surprising since political parties themselves are not anchored in the various social cleavages running through African Nations. So political parties are made and unmade according to the political situation of the moment and based on personal alliances among political elites. Their survival depends on a patron who often assumes the presidency of the party and, in time, will also be the preferred candidate for positions of political responsibility. Democratization within the party as a prerequisite for the professionalization of politics becomes trivial since the concept of political party comes down to a "one-man show" where the goal is unfortunately too often the accumulation of capital through access to the State. In contrast to the West where the excessive accumulation of capital takes place mainly in the private sector.

As a result elections in Africa are often not much more than a costly public relations exercise with no impact on the democratic legitimacy of leaders, but primarily intended to satisfy international organizations and donors who will then refer to them to justify their interventions.

### ***Rethinking the prospects for democracy in Africa***

Does all this mean that Africa does not have a right to democracy? No! In fact, one must think about the kind of democracy that is the most appropriate for the African continent; and consider other less common political decision-making procedures and processes, since the "majority rules" principle is not the only option.

This debate must be held in African societies with the participation of all segments of these societies. I will therefore not make any recommendations at this point; but rather limit myself to just three points which seem important to mention in any discussions on democracy in Africa:

**1) The question of state boundaries:** a good number of conflicts on the African continent emerge and re-emerge because of geographical borders inherited from colonization. A look at the map of the continent reveals the arbitrary nature of these boundaries. However these borders were never the subject of considerable discussion among African countries or even within the African Union. As idealistic as it may seem, I believe that a long-term political stability on the continent cannot be achieved without addressing this issue at a political level.

**2) The issue of traditional institutions:** Politics existed in Africa long before the establishment of the so called "modern state". State apparatuses were added onto the traditional institutions, which although relegated to second place, have continued to play a role in the management of social conflicts, particularly in rural areas. This often resulted in an artificial state structure without social anchor and operating "outside" of society; and traditional institutions managing a number of conflicts at the local level, and to which people refer, because they know the processes and their history. It might therefore be more appropriate to build democratic forms of policy making which are anchored in these traditional institutions. The countries in Africa that have attempted to integrate their traditional institutions into their "modern state" structures include Ghana, Botswana, South Africa and Uganda. Further analysis would show that these countries' success both economically and politically, is partly due to this combination of "modernity" and "tradition".

3) **The Political Decision Making Process:** Pre-colonial African societies are characterized by many anthropologists and sociologists as so-called "consensual "societies. Citing for example, the practice of extensive consultations and village meetings, it was noted that policy was rarely, if ever, made on the basis of the majority rule principle. Instead, compromise, consensus and therefore the integrative process in which all interested parties express themselves, has often been viewed by Africans themselves as better able to take into account the cultural foundations of the political decision-making process. Considering this reality, it is unclear how the political decision making process based on the "majority rule principle" could have any cultural anchor.

In light of the above reflections, the ethnocentrism that characterizes the imposition, encouragement and / or promotion of the electoral practice in developing countries, does not seem to be overly successful. Since the definition of democracy is itself a political issue, it therefore requires a radical review of all preconceived ideas which equate elections to democracy. This review could especially benefit from taking into account the social structures rather than state structures in Africa; as well as the cultural values dear to the people of the African continent rather than standards imported from the West.

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